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# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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*a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left*

*Winter 2020*

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## Marijuana reform: Time to speak up

The war on marijuana has been a costly failure. It is ending across America because it has caused far more harm than good.

The war has broken up too many families, upended too many livelihoods, thrown too many children into poverty, and taken a lifetime financial toll on otherwise law-abiding citizens.

Taxpayers have bankrolled this costly failure that has disproportionately targeted Black Iowans and their families. Since their inception decades ago, Iowa's marijuana laws have not been equally or fairly enforced. According to a recent ACLU study, a Black person is almost 8 times more likely to get arrested for marijuana than a White person, even though their usage rates are the same.

Like most wars, when we take stock of the lives that have been destroyed, we conclude that it was a colossal mistake. The war on marijuana is one of those wars.

Over the decades, tens of thousands of Iowans and their families have suffered irreparable economic and social harm from a criminal marijuana possession record. In 2019 alone, more than 5,000 Iowans were convicted of marijuana possession. For too many, it has paved the way for a lifetime of economic insecurity.

Iowa taxpayers are on the hook for tens of millions annually for this failure. They pay twice, as they pick up an enormous financial tab for an unfair policing and criminal justice system, plus the cost of the social safety net to support thousands of families that deal with the economic turmoil resulting from a criminal record.

Truth is, marijuana is proven to be less toxic than alcohol, has less potential for addiction, and is less likely to contribute to serious medical problems. Yet alcohol is legal, regulated, and celebrated, while the possession and use of marijuana makes you a criminal.

Call Governor Reynolds:  
515-281-5211

Call your State Senator:  
515-281-3371

Call your State Representative:  
515-281-3221

For good reason, marijuana laws are being reexamined and toppled across the country. Fifteen states have decided to regulate marijuana like alcohol, including Illinois, and Michigan and conservative South Dakota. Twenty-six states have decriminalized small amounts. Fifteen states have laws that allow expungement of marijuana possession convictions.

Meanwhile, Iowa maintains some of the dumbest, harshest criminal penalties and one of the most racially biased enforcement records in the country. We have the power to end the illicit marijuana market, refocus law enforcement on more serious problems, and begin a new chapter in how we control and regulate marijuana use among adult citizens.

To be clear, some people will have trouble with marijuana. Like alcohol, it can be addressed as a behavioral health problem rather than a criminal justice issue.

Most Iowans now support regulating marijuana like alcohol. It will create thousands of jobs across Iowa and a new revenue stream to support equity and business investments in Black communities, as well as new revenue for state and local services. We must also remove the criminal justice burden, expunge the criminal records of thousands of Iowans, and help them recover from the negative impact of these unfair laws.

If you think marijuana prohibition has caused more harm than good, is a costly waste of your money, and is a government infringement on your liberty, or if you think Iowa's unequal enforcement of marijuana laws is unjust, it's time to speak up.

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# We can't escape

America has become a nation in which there is really only one topic. The Creature. The current occupant of The People's House. Even as he fades from view, Donald Trump throws himself into high relief with ever more dramatic delusional claims and heresies. He is our first president to actively pursue sedition as a career path. And like all of you, I long for escape.

To that end I've done considerable reading, hoping to dodge reality in literature. One book during the last months provided unusually deep hiding for me. It pulled me into a world of which I'd previously been only superficially aware – the world of art and, more specifically, art restoration and authentication. Ben Lewis's *The Last Leonardo* is detailed, meticulous, and lively.

His subject is the attribution of a discovered *Salvator Mundi* to Leonardo da Vinci, its restoration, and its eventual sale for a whopping \$450M. The auction outcome staggered the world and caused tectonic shiftings and rumblings in the world of art and art history.

For one seeking an absorbing hideout, it was perfect. I met Diane Modestini, restorer of masterpieces. Her job was to repair for the world a work that was damaged even to its foundation. I learned of the varieties of wood and their source locations in Italy and how that aided in attributing works to Leonardo or his students, known communally as the "Leonardeschi." I learned of the epic roller derby of opinion among art historians, academics whose attributions are coveted

by art buyers and sellers and auction houses looking to make premium prices on works they've located.

Lewis dives deeply enough to actively trace the pursuit of Italian masterworks by aristocrats, royalty and their representatives across the globe throughout history. Which royal family member had which markings impressed into the back panels of each prize item, which paintings did or did not have that hallmark? Was this *Salvator Mundi* the one discovered in the royal inventory of King Charles I, or the one named in a museum catalog among a raft of acquisitions? Which *Salvators* were stored in unused rooms, and which were catalogued as being in private royal quarters? Which art historians were working with and for whom as they unearthed these obscure details and glancing mentions to locate a painting that might be this *Salvator*, a long-lost work by Leonardo? I was awash in details, intrigue, and good old human avarice. I was having a great time.

And then – Donald Trump waded into the middle of it all in a famous 2017 photo including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Melania, in which the men all had their hands on an eerily glowing orb. Trump, Lewis validated, was mixed up with some of the dicier characters involved in the process of off-shoring art for the wealthy. This involves high-tech storage in Geneva, with premium security and almost indescribable anonymity for those storing art there. It is murky business.

Trump's affiliation with bin Salman became notable. In 2017, as he was reported to have begun taking over for his failing father, Trump supposedly exclaimed, "We've put our man on top!"

Amidst this ascension, bin Salman chose to purchase the *Salvator Mundi* for \$450M. By then it was attributed to Leonardo, albeit with some controversy. Lewis posits that, since this was bin Salman's first purchase of a major work, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner may have advised him on its acquisition.

It seems a far journey from the haunting face of Leonardo's Savior holding a clear orb to bin Salman to the grisly dismemberment of a journalist, and a US president's assistance in halting its Congressional investigation. But an evil thing journeys fast and far. The very wealthy may fancy a pretty painting one moment and a man's execution the next. Powerful people are often both depraved and inescapable.

In October 2018, journalist Jamal Khashoggi walked into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to get marriage documents. He was forcibly taken, drugged, and ultimately dismembered by Saudi agents.

Trump, according to Bob Woodward in his book *Rage*, when pressed about bin Salman and the outrage over the murder, offered this: "I saved his ass. I was able to get Congress to leave him alone. I was able to get them to stop."

So much for escaping into the world of feverish acquisitions and investigations of art. An astonishing painting is held by a thug. It has been removed from public sight, its whereabouts uncertain. Most appalling of all, a good man is dead, brutally killed, and President Donald J. Trump boasts of saving the murderer's ass.

This is where we are, where we stand as a country. We can't escape – not in books, art, or anywhere else. We can only await the departure of this monstrous example of degeneracy from our highest office.

—Kim Painter is a duly elected public official in Johnson County.

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# Monuments to avarice and pride

Father Clark kicked me off the altar boy squad in 1967 for refusing to cut my hair. “If you don’t get your hair cut you can’t be an altar boy!”

I didn’t know I had a choice. It was an easy one. I left. Within two weeks, Father Clark lost twenty of the forty adolescent males he gathered that day I departed with a smile. They didn’t know it was a choice, either. I was so looking forward to violating the commandment prohibiting adultery that I must have overlooked the one on haircuts. Apparently, “Jesus had long hair” was not an appropriate reply. After raising two wonderful daughters, I stopped attending church regularly.

Religion fascinates me, but devotees to most religions fascinate me more. If a religious leader tells a congregation that it must obey a command of the denomination’s tenets or pay the after-life consequences, the lemmings will strictly adhere. Unless, of course, that command doesn’t seem to fit into the congregant’s scheme of life, such as abortion or the death penalty. However, a hallowed law of the faith may easily dominate an individual’s discretion in common sense.

Last October, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s office drew some circles or boxes on a map and colored some of those figures in red, some in orange, some yellow. Each colored figure represented a toxic, more toxic, or most toxic location in which New Yorkers were limited to how many people could gather in certain locations. It was called the Cluster Action Initiative (Clusterfuck was more like it). Its intent was good; the results were disastrous.

Catholics and Jews sued the governor to overturn the mandate. They called the action discrimination, which

it was. Churches and synagogues were extremely upset because the limitations would prevent more than ten Catholics from receiving communion at Mass. Worse was how the governor’s action played out with the Orthodox Jewish community. Synagogues in the red districts were limited to ten worshipers at a time, and ten are necessary to have a minyan (or quorum).

Very few know of a Lakota Sioux quote that I live by: “Why do you go into a building to worship God when he is all around us?” What is so important about buildings of worship? Jesus preached outside; Moses roamed for forty years in the desert.

I understand the need that some people have for communal celebration, but I find it difficult that a ceremonial rite must be conducted in a specific building at a specific time daily, weekly, monthly, or at any other religiously-timed interval.

The recent US Supreme Court opinion striking down the colorful executive order issued by the New York governor, was the correct decision. But it didn’t have a lot to do with preserving religious freedom. Actually, it was a technical defeat for the Court’s chief justice.

Chief Justice Roberts dissented because he thought the matter of striking down the executive order was before the Big Court prematurely. I agree. However, I also agree with the four conservative justices who wrote that the governor’s action was discriminatory. This is one of those instances when both sides of the issue are in the right.

The progressive left and the far right are mutually happy with this decision. The preservation of religious liberty was the outcome seen by the Catholic

Church and the Orthodox Jews. Cuomo’s ill-advised limitation of 10 people in a religious building, while allowing an unlimited amount of people in “essential” businesses, truly violated more than one constitutional no-no. Some of those essential businesses included liquor stores and bike shops. What was he thinking?

Many churches are monuments to what religion abhors – avarice and pride. The simple Quaker Meeting House is the best example of what a church building should be.

How nice if everyone went outside on the day of their church’s holiest events and praised their respective Big Guy just beyond their front door? Or stayed safely inside and did the same? In the New Testament, Jesus said to go into your closet to pray; that the Lord knows what you ask for before you even request it. Seems to me that praising the Big Guy only in a building built with marvelous marble, walnut wood, and glittering gold violates a commandment.

—Marty Ryan *lives and worships in Des Moines, Iowa.*

## **Marijuana reform: Time to speak up, cont’d from Page 1**

Iowa’s elected officials, especially Republicans, need to hear from you. Republicans have staunchly opposed marijuana reform. Decades of bad policy and negative perceptions die hard.

In January, I will again introduce legislation to regulate and control marijuana the way we regulate and control alcohol. I am looking for bipartisan co-sponsors. Please contact your state legislators and Governor Reynolds today. In Iowa, Republicans are the only ones that can end this failed war and begin a new era of a rational and just marijuana policy.

—Joe Bolkcom, *State Senator from District 43, first introduced medical marijuana legislation in 2003.*

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# Local government: Where the buck stops for COVID-19

At the local level, we see the problems. We know people are hurting in countless ways. We talk to fellow local government elected officials, city staff, and non-profit providers who are working harder than ever. We talk to doctors and nurses, mental healthcare providers, teachers and para-educators and parents, to daycare providers and parents who have no daycare. We talk to religious leaders, youth leaders, kids and parents involved in sports.

In a crisis such as a pandemic, government is supposed to function like a pyramid. The top of the pyramid makes coordinated decisions and allocates resources. That's not what happened. President Trump largely abdicated responsibility and handed it off to governors, then exacerbated the situation worse by politicizing a life-or-death public health issue. Governor Reynolds has consistently reacted only after numbers have risen – policy-making through the rearview mirror.

It's like a high stakes marbles game where the marbles careen through different gates, with one common denominator: they are all headed down to the bottom of the tray. For COVID-19, that bottom is local government.

We seek to do all we can to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, but Governor Reynolds' emergency proclamations tie our hands. Her consistent message to local governments has been, in essence: I'll make state policy, and even though you may have a better grasp of local conditions and transmission, I won't delegate.

Take face covering mandates – one of the simplest and most effective ways to break the chain of transmission. Until recently, Reynolds both refused to

impose any mandate and maintained that we at the local level had no such authority.

We did it anyway – not to buck the governor, but to protect our people. In July, with tens of thousands of students set to pour into town and positivity rates on the rise, we knew we needed a face covering mandate. When the mayor of Muscatine issued a mandate, we concluded we had the legal authority, but first needed to build consensus. After endless emails, phone calls, discussions with public health and U of I doctors, an op-ed in the Gazette, and a letter from Johnson County Public Health urging us to adopt one, with the help of University Heights, we convened a meeting of the “Joint Entities” – elected officials from cities, towns, county and school boards across Johnson County – to hear about COVID-19 directly from medical and public health experts.

The next day, Iowa City mayor Bruce Teague ordered the first iteration of our face covering mandate under his emergency proclamation. The city also bulk-purchased PPE to distribute via non-profits, and worked hard with a coalition of community and business leaders, university leaders, and student government to push out the message. The county board of health and supervisors followed suit. What seems obvious now was path-breaking then.

But the hard truth is that, though we are home to the state's premiere healthcare facility, without Governor Reynolds and President Trump modeling the behavior (in fact, doing the opposite, with large “freedom rallies” in the run-up to the November 3 election), we could only do so much.

Post-election, as our numbers soared, I worked with our mayor to organize and convene an emergency meeting of the Joint Entities, to again hear from medical and public health officials. Elected officials in their Zoom squares were focused and serious, and the media mirrored our pleas.

And here we are – one of the highest infection rates in the nation, way too many Iowans dying of (not to mention suffering long-term effects from) COVID-19, and enormous stress on our healthcare workers. I just can't shake the image of all those empty chairs at dining room tables.

If there is a bright side, it is that we are building relationships, sharing information and ideas, and coordinating among different levels of local government and civil society – and those relationships are here to stay. Once again: we're far from the ideal level of government to deal with the pandemic, but the leadership vacuum at the top pushed it into our laps – and we care and are determined to act.

So the next time (in 2021, in fact), when there are local elections, please pay attention and vote. A paltry 15% of eligible voters, at best, voted local in the 2019 local elections. We impact your lives every day. Vote like it. Oh, and please wear a mask.

—Janice Weiner serves on the Iowa City City Council.

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# The Governor's cookie jar: Who got the biggest handful?

From the beginning of the pandemic and recession in March through the end of October, local governments across Iowa cut 8,700 jobs. That did not need to happen. Back in April of this year, Congress passed the third major piece of COVID relief – the CARES Act. It included enough funding to Iowa to avoid many of those job cuts. So what went wrong? And how did Iowa businesses end up with tax cuts instead?

The CARES Act established the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) that allocated money to states and major cities to pay for coronavirus-related expenditures. There was an allocation to each state based on population. In states with major metro areas, the cities got some of the funding directly, the state got the rest. In states like Iowa without a large metropolis, all of the funding went directly to the state, leaving it up to each state to distribute a portion to local governments, including school districts. Treasury Department guidance on use of the funds specified that states were expected to distribute 45 percent to local governments.

Iowa's share of the CRF was \$1.25 billion. That is a sizable chunk of money compared to the state's annual budget of about \$8 billion. So 45 percent of that would have been \$563 million, to be distributed in some fashion to cities, counties and school districts, who were facing added expenses due to the pandemic, for public safety personnel, to facilitate remote working by employees, to develop and implement a new system of remote learning by students, to cover sanitation measures, and other costs.

The Iowa legislature in their special session in May failed to

even consider exercising some legislative control over this massive federal grant, leaving it entirely to the discretion of our Governor how to spend \$1.25 billion. What did she do? She allocated \$125 million to cities and counties—10 percent, not 45 percent of the total. Then in the summer, in the misguided assumption that the pandemic was under control, and consistent with the governor's unwavering allegiance to business interests at the expense of ordinary citizens, the Governor allocated nearly 40 percent of the entire fund to the state's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund. On top of other commitments—to agriculture, small businesses, a limited rent and foreclosure relief program, hospitals, broadband expansion—very little of the fund was left to address future needs.

So what's wrong with shoring up the UI Trust Fund? Isn't that helping Iowa workers? The short answer is no, of course not. That is not what this Governor is about. Certainly the recession and the sharp increase in unemployment promised to draw down a substantial share of the trust fund, which is filled by a payroll tax on employers. But if it runs short, worker's benefits do not disappear. Instead, the state can obtain an interest free loan from the Federal government for up to two years. When the loan comes due, the economy will likely have recovered and UI tax revenues will have returned to normal levels, replenishing the funds and allowing repayment of the loan. Here's the rub: If the fund has not fully recovered, state UI tax rates on employers could rise a little to bring the balance up to what is needed. Heaven forbid! A potential, future, small tax increase on business! The

Governor couldn't allow that, so she used the CRF to make sure it is not going to happen. Since the Iowa economy has recovered faster than anticipated, the CRF money may actually end up enabling UI tax rates to fall.

The pandemic has only worsened since the summer. Our health care workers are under tremendous stress, facilities are strained, foreclosures continue, but because of the Governor's actions we have little money left in the CRF to address these problems. While the Governor has shown no inclination to return to any of the strictures that were in place in April or May, when the virus was far less prevalent than today, if she could be convinced to do so there would be no money left to fund assistance to the small businesses forced to close or for other aid to those affected.

The bottom line is this: Iowa teachers and workers got laid off so that businesses could be assured that their payroll tax rate would not rise, and might fall, some two years in the future. This harms not only those workers, and all those who rely on public services, but the Iowa economy, as we lose the incomes and purchasing power of all those workers

*—Peter Fisher is a folksinger who lives in rural Iowa. In his spare time he is Research Director for Common Good Iowa.*

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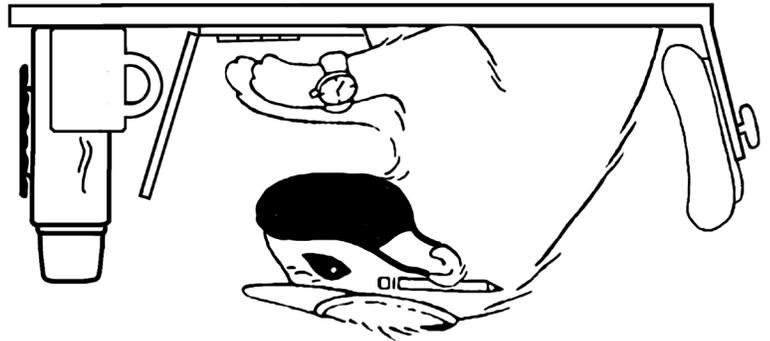
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